

## Summary

This Final Environmental Impact Report/Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIR/FEIS) assesses the anticipated environmental impacts of constructing and operating the Oakdale Expressway Project. The purpose of the proposed project is to reduce the traffic congestion on Route 120, improve safety by reducing the number of accidents, and promote the completion of the Route 120 system. This project would be compatible with planned future improvements to Route 120. Traffic congestion occurs on Routes 120 and 120/108 in the Oakdale vicinity during peak periods on weekdays and on weekends (especially during spring and summer holidays) due to recreational vacationers who travel to Yosemite National Park, the Jamestown and Sonora areas, and points eastward. Traffic backs up for several miles on the eastern approaches to Oakdale during major spring and summer holiday weekends. Existing Routes 120 and 120/108 do not provide adequate capacity to carry interregional traffic along with locally generated traffic in this growing city.

Caltrans would acquire the right-of-way (ROW) (minimum 263 ft [80 m] wide) for a future transportation facility (most likely a four-lane freeway) and would construct a two-lane expressway within this ROW. Five alternative alignments were proposed for this project: 1, 2A, 2B, 2C, and 2D, ranging in length from 6.4 mi (10.3 km) to 10 mi (16 km). These alternatives are illustrated in Figure A. Costs for the alternatives range from \$93.4 million to \$102.8 million (in 2003/2004 dollars). These alignments were developed after conducting a systematic, interdisciplinary examination of over 60 different alternative alignments for meeting the project's purpose and need. The potential environmental impacts of each of these five alternatives are analyzed in this FEIR/FEIS. Also evaluated in this FEIR/FEIS is the No Action Alternative, which represents continued use of Routes 120 and 108 for interregional travel through Oakdale and its vicinity.

### ***Preferred Alternative***

Based on community and agency input, and engineering and environmental analysis, Alternative 2A has been selected as the preferred alternative for the project. Alternative 2A was selected as the preferred alternative because it would have the least overall impact to the environment and best fulfilled the design aspects of the project. This alternative is described in detail in Section 2.3.2, Build Alternative 2A, and Section 2.5, Preferred Alternative. In accordance with Section 404 (b)(1) Guidelines, the Army Corps of Engineers (COE) determined that Alternative 2A is the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA). The Section 404 (b)(1) Alternatives Analysis is located in Appendix D, and the LEDPA determination letter from the COE is

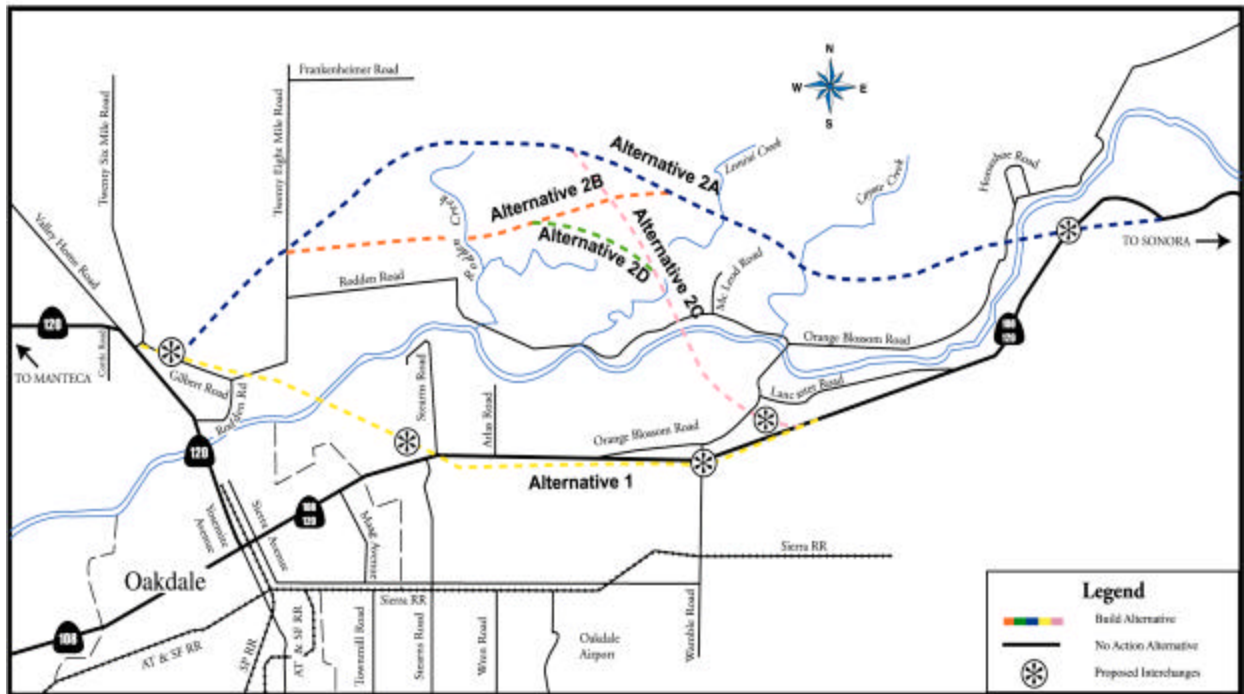


Figure A Locations of Alternatives



in Appendix A, page A-28. The US Environmental Protection Agency has concurred with this finding (Appendix I, page I-9).

### **Potential Impacts**

The primary environmental impacts from the proposed project are in the areas of biological resources, farmland, and community effects. Potential biological impacts would result mainly from acquisition of land for the ultimate four-lane expressway. Some of this land includes wetlands and other possible habitat areas. Likewise, potential impacts to farmland would result from the acquisition of agricultural land for the ultimate four-lane facility. Potential community impacts are primarily due to business and home relocations. No direct use of any Section 4(f) resources by any of the build alternatives was identified. See Appendix E for Section 4(f) information, including consideration of constructive use of Section 4(f) resources.

Potential impacts from the build alternatives on wetlands and waters include removal and fragmentation of wetland habitats, alteration of wetland hydrology, and changes in wetland species composition. Depending on the alternative, the construction of the expressway would impact as little as 8.13 ac (3.29 ha) or as much as 18.57 ac (7.52 ha) of wetlands and other waters of the U.S. Alternative 1 and Alternatives 2C/2D would affect 0.86 ac (0.35 ha) and 0.42 ac (0.16 ha), respectively, of high-quality riparian areas at their respective crossings of the Stanislaus River. Alternatives 2A/2B would cross the river at a point where the habitat is already degraded, and would impact about 1.4 ac (0.57 ha). For all other categories of wetlands and other waters of the U.S. that were examined as part of this study, the potential impacts from the build alternatives are for the most part equal. In addition, most of the affected wetlands and other waters of the U.S. have low to moderate probabilities of performing key functions such as flood control, water quality, or habitat.

Principal impacts to threatened and endangered species include habitat loss for the valley elderberry longhorn beetle (VELB), anadromous fish, and Vernal pool fairy shrimp. In addition, oak woodlands protected by the State of California would be affected.

Alternative 1 is the only alternative that would affect spawning gravels (anadromous fish). For VELB habitat, Alternatives 2A/2B clearly have the lowest potential impacts, with only about one-third the number of elderberry stems that would be impacted by Alternatives 2C/2D. Alternatives 2A/2B also have the lowest potential impacts to oak woodlands, with only 0.52 ac (0.21 ha), versus the impacts from the remaining alternatives which are about 8 to 9 times greater. Potential impacts to fairy shrimp sites are similar across all alternatives. Alternative 1 impacts no tiger salamander sites, while Alternative 2B impacts two sites, and Alternatives 2A, 2C, and 2D each impact one site.

Potential impacts to prime and unique farmland range from about 82 ac (33 ha) for Alternative 2C to 223 ac (90 ha) for Alternative 1. The number of agricultural business displacements ranges from six to nine across all alternatives. All build alternatives would require the use of farmland currently enrolled in the Williamson Act.

Each of the build alternatives is predicted to result in community impacts, including relocation of homes and businesses. The overall structure of Oakdale businesses would not change, nor would it adversely affect residential areas. Any of the build alternatives would improve access and circulation, and would reduce accident rates. Alternative 2C would impact the most houses (34), whereas Alternative 2B would impact the fewest houses (20). Alternatives 1, 2C and 2D would each displace three businesses, whereas Alternatives 2A and 2B would each displace four.

In terms of balanced earthwork, Alternative 2A would represent the most efficient use of cut and fill, such that potential impacts from cut and fill operations (e.g., fugitive dust, emissions from earth moving equipment, visual impacts, etc.) would be much less for 2A than for the other build alternatives.

Structures associated with Alternatives 1, 2C, and 2D would be noticeable in the visual landscape. Areas of interest include the Stearns Road Interchange and the Stanislaus River crossing for Alternative 1 and north of Rodden Road for Alternatives 2C and 2D. Potential visual impacts of Alternatives 2A and 2B were found to be minimal. Visual impacts from the proposed expressway would largely result from new views of the surrounding countryside from the vantage point of the new expressway, and thus would primarily be beneficial.

Potential impacts to cultural resources from all alternatives are determined to be minimal. Only Alternative 1 has a possible prehistoric site located at the crossing of the Stanislaus River.

For potential floodplain impacts, none of the build alternatives showed a predicted increase in the base flood elevation (no encroachment on the 100-year floodplain), and impacts were determined to be minimal. The proposed alternatives do not support incompatible floodplain development.

Water quality impacts from construction would be minimal for all build alternatives due to the mandated use of Best Management Practices (BMPs) during construction. Alternative 1 has about three times as many potential hazardous waste sites and impacts as Alternatives 2A, 2B, 2C, or 2D. For hazardous waste, construction would also have

beneficial impacts since any hazardous waste discovered during earth moving operations would be cleaned up, thereby removing potential sources of contamination to soil, groundwater, and atmospheric resources in the future.

Potential air quality impacts were found to be in compliance for carbon monoxide (CO) for all Build Alternatives; one CO hotspot was predicted for the No Action Alternative. The project was found to be in conformity with regional plans for attaining the ambient air quality standards. It is also in conformity with the federal CO standard, meaning that it will not lead to any new violation or worsen any existing violation. The project is included in the currently conforming 2000 Federal Transportation Improvement Program (FTIP) and the 2001 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). Both the FTIP and RTP were approved by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) on March 6, 2002.

In terms of potential noise impacts, Alternative 1 has the highest number of receptors (nine) potentially experiencing noise levels greater than or equal to 66 dBA. Alternative 1 has only six receptors with greater-than-12 dBA increases above background noise levels, whereas Alternatives 2A, 2B, 2C, and 2D each have seven. One soundwall was found to be feasible and reasonable; it would be located on the far west end of the project and would be common to all build alternatives.

Construction operations are expected to result in minimal impacts to air quality, water quality and noise, primarily due to the short-term nature of the construction activities in any one given area.

Growth inducing impacts would be similar for all build alternatives. Due to the controlled access nature of the expressway, none of the alternatives would encourage unplanned growth. Growth in the rural areas, potentially affected by Alternatives 2A/2B, and to a lesser extent by 2C/2D, would be very limited by the absence of infrastructure (e.g., sewer and water), the current land use designations, and county zoning ordinances. Alternative 1 would be located closer to infrastructure, but would also affect areas covered by planning documents for the City and County.

Cumulative impacts are expected to be less than substantial for any of the build alternatives. This project in combination with other future projects could contribute to cumulative impacts in the areas of noise, farmland conversion, and habitat loss.

### ***Mitigation***

Proposed mitigation of potential adverse impacts includes the following:

- Impacts on vernal pool habitat, and the species present within that habitat (including fairy shrimp, tadpole shrimp, and tiger salamander) affected by the proposed project, would be mitigated through preservation, enhancement, and/or creation of habitat via contribution to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) approved fund.
- Mitigation of VELB habitat would be accomplished under the terms of the “Conservation Guidelines for the Valley Elderberry Longhorn Beetle” issued by the USFWS. This would most likely take place on the proposed mitigation site located adjacent to U.S. Army Corp of Engineers (COE) property along the Stanislaus River.
- The total number of oaks removed, whether isolated or in a woodland, would be used to determine the number of oak replacements required, at a ratio of three to one (standard California Department of Fish and Game ratio) for oaks larger than one foot (30 cm) diameter at breast height (dbh). Impacts on riparian habitat would be mitigated near the Stanislaus River and attempts would be made to combine riparian habitat and oak plantings to restore mixed ecosystem habitat destroyed by earlier land uses, such as gravel mining. Possible sites for mixed ecosystem restoration have been explored with field visits and inspection of aerial photography. Mitigation of potential impacts would be implemented on the proposed mitigation site located adjacent to COE property along the Stanislaus River or on COE property if the need for enhancement is identified.
- Mitigation measures for overpass/bridge construction on the Stanislaus River would be necessary to minimize fishery habitat degradation. A construction window would be applied to minimize harm to listed fish species. Construction would be accomplished during low flows in dry summer months (June–September) when adult spawning and fry emergence would not be a critical issue. Use of BMPs during construction, in accordance with Caltrans policies, would minimize sedimentation effects.
- Prior to construction, surveys for nesting migratory birds would be completed to minimize potential adverse effects to these species of concern.
- Displacement of businesses, agricultural operations, and houses would be mitigated through relocation. Adequate resources for all potential displacements (except for possibly one non-profit organization) were found to be available in the Oakdale area. Businesses and non-profit organizations would be offered reestablishment expenses and moving costs. Additional benefits, options, and payments would be determined by the ROW-relocation agent upon meeting with the displacee.
- Results of the noise barrier analysis indicate that mitigation through construction of a soundwall is both reasonable and feasible at one location at the western beginning of the project corridor, adjacent to an existing mobile home park at the northwest corner of Route 120 and Cottle Road (this location is common to all build alternatives). The

proposed soundwall would substantially reduce noise levels at existing homes within the mobile home park.

- Mitigation for potential visual impacts includes revegetation and rounding tops of slopes and bottoms of fill slopes to blend with existing terrain.

***Permits***

Permits for this project include Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) and Section 1601 of the California Fish and Game Code. A water quality certification required by Section 401 of the CWA and a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit also apply to this project.